Project Abstract

The Strength of Social Influence as a Determinant of Organizational Change
SES-0433280
Stephen J. Mezias and Ebony Bridwell-Mitchell
New York University

Overall Mission/Objective: Gaining Insight into Organizational Change

> *At 11:50am the quiet cacophony of buzzing, creaking, ticking gadgets that adorning the cafeteria is drowned out by a group of women discussing their daughters' boyfriends and the best place to buy Splenda in bulk. Yet, woven seamlessly into conversations that might otherwise be characterized as idle, a different kind of conversation is being constructed. It is a conversation about 'what really seems to work in the new reading curriculum'; how to get materials for 'everyday math', 'tips to get Kendrick motivated', 'what would* really *happen if the school didn't make Adequate Yearly Progress.' In the in-between conversations and personal exchanges held in the social spaces that structure their professional interactions the thirty-member teaching staff of a small school in Staten Island, New York sets the process of organizational change in motion.*

Despite assertions of predominant organizational change models which rest on making boundedly rational assessments of performance against aspirations (Cyert & March, 1963), change in many organizational contexts likely evolve from much more emergent processes. This is particularly true in complex, uncertain and ambiguous environments (e.g. Perrow, 1982) where absent and/or contested external standards, feedback lags, organic technologies and diverse stakeholders complicate the assumptions of more traditional models. Our work investigates a model of organizational change based on social dynamics and emergent decision processes.

Project Development: A Model and Investigation of Sociocognitive Processes

The Model. The model we investigate presumes change stimuli, in the form of salient and ambiguous information enter the social network through one or multiple persons (MacDonald, 1995). Individuals make initial assessments of the stimuli as a function of their individual backgrounds, predispositions and historical social network experiences. Yet, faced with the ambiguous nature of the information and what should be the appropriate response, members turn to others to complete their assessments (e.g. Festinger, 1954) and individual assessments enter into the local network through formal discussions, natural conversations, stories, gossip around the water cooler, etc. (e.g. Boje, 1991).

These social interactions filter and structure information resulting in individual assessments that are updated and changed by the assessments of other network members even as those assessments are changed and updated by the assessments of the first actor. These recursive assessments generate a collective understanding of the need for change based on two strategic and institutional criteria. Specifically, these considerations include whether the resources of

change are known and available (Levinthal and March, 1981; Dutton and Duncan, 1987; Milliken, 1990), whether increased performance in key areas can be expected at a relatively low cost (Cyert and March, 1963; Oliver, 1991); whether stakeholders accept the adapted form as a better way to do business (Oliver, 1991) and whether there is time and social pressure to implement changes (Dutton and Duncan, 1987; Strebel, 1998).

The Industry Setting. The current study examines the social and cognitive dynamics of change in six New York City public schools, which differ in their institutional and organizational propensity to change. Specifically, the school sample is stratified into three groups based on their five-year average performance history and their current regulatory constrains. Two schools are from the highest performing third of NYC schools and are exempt from the regulatory initiatives of the federal, state and local governments (e.g. No Child Left behind (NCLB), the Mayoral "Children First" initiative and the NY State Registration Review process). Two schools are from the middle third of performers and operate with the most typical set of regulatory constraints as they are imposed by the federal and city government. The final two schools are from the lowest third of performers and face the most stringent constraints being mandated to change by all three governing agencies.

Data Collection & Analysis. The first phase of data collection began with a five month ethnographic pilot in two NYC schools that served as exemplars for differing institutional and organizational propensity to change (two schools randomly selected from the 2003 list of schools currently added to or recently removed from the State Registration Review list). Analysis of data collected during the 60-plus hours of observation 27 half-hour to forty-five minute interviews with staff supported refinement of the theory and generation of context appropriate survey measures for the ongoing study. The current twenty-page instrument (administered three time a year for three years beginning in April 2005) attends to a number of organizational, social and individual decision characteristics revealed to be central to sociocognitive network dynamics, including, 1) work schedules, 2) tenure and training, 3) friendship and advice ties, 4) work roles and routines, 5) professional aspirations, 6) status and perceptions of relative deprivation. As a measure of change, we collect data on participants' reported use of twenty-five different instructional strategies that are among the improvement strategies most commonly proposed by the local, state and federal departments of education. We also collect classroom-level data on students' standardized test score performance and employ a longitudinal multilevel model to assess the relationship between individual decision influences (e.g. tenure, training, aspirations, and perceptions of relative deprivation), social and structural characteristics (e.g. friendship and advice ties, work schedules, roles and routines) and action at the individual and organization level (e.g. choice of instructional strategy and 'unit' performance, respectively).

Early Findings and Broader Impacts: Issue Selling and Social Spaces

Lessons revealed from the pilot study reveal the importance not only of professional community interactions but of how change-relevant issues are framed and 'sold' (Dutton and Ashford, 1993) to organizational members, given their past experiences. Our research also suggest that organizations underutilize existing social capital by isolating members, poorly structuring formal interactions and missing opportunities to establish new norms through active participation of the

organization's leadership. These are lessons which suggest the importance of effective organizational design – a topic which will be further explored in on-site workshops planned at each school site at the conclusion of the project.

Project Website

http://w4.stern.nyu.edu/management/academic